



# Fathers and murders: A retrospective study of paternal filicide in Italy

Amelia RIZZO<sup>1\*</sup>, Nicolina ROSI<sup>2</sup>, Giada IUELE<sup>3</sup>, Donaldo CANALES<sup>4</sup>, Lucia DELLA VILLA<sup>5</sup>, Gaetana RUSSO<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adjunct Professor in Clinical Psychology, Social Psychology and Organizational Psychology, Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Messina, 98122 Messina, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-6229-6463

<sup>2</sup>PhD in Criminology, University of Messina, Messina, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0003-4724-3379

<sup>3</sup>Clinical and Health Psychology in the Life Cycle, Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Messina, Messina, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0003-0174-5912

<sup>4</sup>Doctoral student, University of New Brunswick-Saint John, Canada. ORCID: 0000-0003-4013-3417

<sup>5</sup>MD, Psychiatrist, Provincial Health Authority of Messina, Messina, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-5301-9616

<sup>6</sup>Associate Professor in Criminology, University of Messina, Messina, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-8298-1281

\*Correspondence.

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** An amount of literature has heavily focused on homicidal mothers. Nevertheless, little is known about paternal filicides due to the lower frequency of these events. This study aimed to identify the spatiotemporal coordinates, authors' and victims' characteristics, and the context in which these murders occur to identify specific patterns.

**Methods:** We analyzed 76 events in Italy between 1996 and 2012 involving 134 victims. The data were collected through a careful and thorough review of the daily press and encoded on an Excel® sheet specially designed for data collection.

**Results:** Findings show a significant incidence of psychiatric disorders, a history of violent behavior, employment problems, and low-skilled professional roles. In particular, violence seems to be determined by the fear of loss, which is more common among the common law partner and among the youngest male, especially when the son is far.

**Conclusion:** The in-depth analysis of the phenomenon may contribute to its best knowledge and identify the areas in which psychosocial intervention is required based on prevention best practices.

**Take-home message:** This study's exploration of paternal filicide in Italy between 1996 and 2012 reveals critical factors like psychiatric disorders, history of violence, employment issues, and specific social dynamics, emphasizing the need for targeted psychosocial interventions and prevention strategies.

**Keywords:** mental health; paternal filicide; psychiatric illness; violence.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Italian Association of Marriage Counsellors, in Italy, between 1970 and 2008, consumed 378 infanticides, with an average of 9.9 per year. In 90% of the cases of infanticide involving children between zero and six years, the author is the mother. Every year, about 500 thousand children are born in Italy. This means that the risk for a child to be murdered

by his/her mother is 0.00165%. Most studies addressed filicide in Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Japan, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States [1].

Furthermore, the study concerning filicide in Italy was carried out on samples of female murders [2,3]. On the contrary, still little is known about paternal filicide. The majority of the existing literature has focused on the comparison between maternal and paternal filicide, finding both differences and similarities. Bourget, Grace & Whitehurst [4], for example, found a common factor: the association between filicide and parental pre-existing psychiatric disorders, but also the presence of significant life stressors, social isolation, and lack of social support, and a history of abuse in childhood. "Additional factors that differentiate filicidal fathers from filicidal mothers are: (1) fathers rarely commit neonaticide; (2) filicidal fathers are usually older; (3) filicidal fathers are more likely to have a history of violence toward their children; and (4) more fathers who commit filicide also commit suicide" (p.79).

A secondary aspect that regards paternal filicide is the population studied. Marleau et al. [5] reported in detail 10 study cases of men who committed paternal filicide, hospitalized at the Institut Philippe Pinel de Montreal, Quebec, between 1982 and 1994. Even Bourget & Gagné [6] examined 77 cases of paternal filicide that occurred between 1991 and 2001 in Quebec, Canada. Liem & Koenraadt [7] conducted a similar study in the Netherlands for the period 1953–2004, with 79 men and 82 women having killed or attempted to kill their own child(ren).

Literature showed that psychopathological factors, notably severe mental health disorders such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, are frequently implicated in these cases. The interplay of these disorders with psychoactive substance misuse significantly magnifies the risk, often disrupting cognitive and emotional regulation [8].

Concurrently, socio-economic stressors, including unemployment and financial instability, emerge as pivotal contributors, exacerbating underlying psychological distress. The dynamic of interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of familial discord or custodial disputes, often serves as a catalyst in the escalation toward filicide. Additionally, the presence of personality disorders characterized by impulsivity and affective instability notably increases the propensity for such acts [9].

Social isolation, an overlooked factor, significantly deprives individuals of essential support mechanisms, impeding effective coping strategies. Furthermore, the impact of historical trauma and post-traumatic stress, especially in populations with prior exposure to high-intensity stressors like combat, cannot be understated. In a subset of cases, filicide is driven by delusional cognitions or misperceptions regarding the child's well-being, necessitating a nuanced understanding of the father's mental state [10].

However, to our knowledge, there are no studies that have focused on paternal filicide in the Italian context. Hence, the purpose of the present study is to identify the spatiotemporal coordinates, the characteristics of the author, the victims, and the context in which these murders take place to identify specific patterns of paternal filicide in Italy.

## **METHODS**

### ***Study design and procedure***

In this retrospective design study, the data was collected through the major national newspapers, and all available information on the web was printed, crossed, and verified, raising the level of reliability of the information collected and allowing us to get a good grip on reality in quantity and quality. Our series consists of 76 homicidal events, which occurred in a familiar environment all over the country over a period of time between 1 January 1996 and 31 May 2012, with 76 authors and 134 victims. The murders examined do not constitute the totality of those that occurred. Still, they represent the vast majority, and the remarkably long period during which they occurred and the many variables examined allowed us to proceed with a thorough overview of a decade of paternal filicides in our country. The data collected, processed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 24.0), were analyzed by studying the evolution of the variables (for most categorical) using the Chi-square test and appropriately represented in frequency tables and graphical representations. As a

result, to explore the relationship of association between groups of variables, Spearman ranks correlations. Finally, we compared groups of subjects, divided according to such victims involved (murder of children only vs. murder of children and spouse), to identify contextual differences concerning risk factors and murder mode.

### **Study instrument**

The data were collected through a structured grid, specifically conceived, consisting of four sections: (1) time-space coordinates; (2) the characteristics of the victims; (3) the characteristics of the offender; (4) characteristics of the murder.

### **Study sample**

The sample comprises 76 male authors aged between 25 and 63 ( $M = 40.9$ ,  $SD = 7.6$ ). Of these, 92.1% are Italian, and 6 are Italian citizens with foreign origins (one from Eastern Europe, one from another European country, two are Africans, and two are Asian). The victims are 134. The sample is divided into two subgroups: the cases in which only the children were killed ( $N = 37$ ) and cases that also involved the author's wife - spouse/partner or former spouse/partner ( $N = 37$ ). We excluded two cases from the comparison where other relatives were also involved. The intended victims (the children) are, therefore, 94, aged between 0 months and 14 years ( $M = 6.8$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ ).

### **Data analysis**

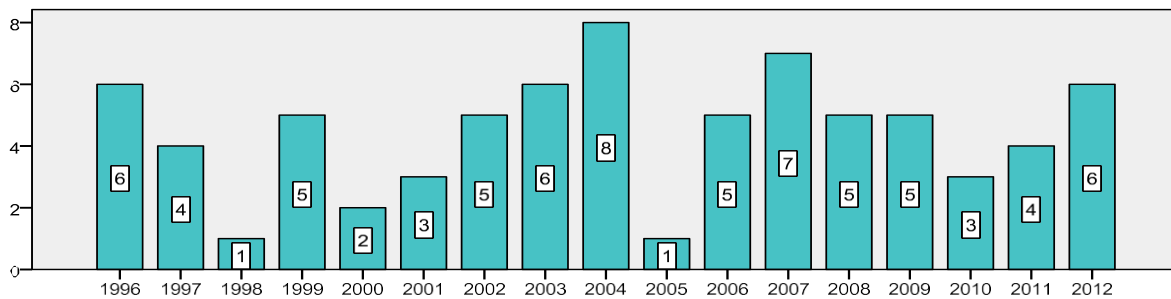
Regarding risk factors for paternal filicide, we used the following categories: (1) *Abnormal lived*: cases in which the murder appears linked to a pathological lived fostered by a condition of psychiatric or existential suffering (incurable diseases, loneliness, old age); (2) *Separation or abandonment*, actual or dreaded: cases in which the murder is directly or indirectly related to problems, suffering, or anger related to a threatened or acted separation; (3) *Ongoing family conflict*: homicide cases in which the couple was in a situation of protracted animosity fostered by jealousy, abuse of power, conflicting economic interests, character incompatibility, difficulties of living together. To this category belongs also the "fight or altercation" in which the interpersonal relationship between the murderer and the victim, not distinguished by particular conflicts until the time of the murder, is suddenly disturbed by a transient situation of conflict, which triggers precisely the criminal fact; (4) *Existential precariousness* and subcultural values: we have included in this category those cases in which the murder is the tragic end of life situations extremely poor or heavily influenced by the typical values of a behind subculture.

Univariate analysis explored the four areas related to the data collection grid, and then the variables considered were subsequently correlated and compared to the different groups that emerged. In the second step, we calculated the Spearman Rho correlations to analyze the relationships between 15 risk factors identified in the data collection.

## **RESULTS**

### **Time-space coordinates**

The distribution of crime in the Italian Regions does not seem random ( $\chi^2 = 44.4$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). It focuses more on regions such as Lombardy and Lazio, followed by Emilia Romagna and Sicily. During the span considered, on average, almost 5 cases occur for each region. It is worth noting that there has been no filicide in some areas, such as in Molise, Umbria, Trentino, and Aosta Valley. When these data are classified according to the Istat division of the Italian regions, including North West (18 cases), Centre (18), North East (17), South (10), and Islands (10), no significant differences were found. Observing the frequency trend of murders over the 16 years examined, we can see that the paternal filicides in Italy are an average of four per year. Figure 1 shows two peaks, however, that can be observed: 2004 was the year in which the greatest frequency of cases was recorded, while 2005 and 1998 were the years with fewer episodes.



**Figure 1** - Frequency of paternal filicides per year.

As for the season, the highest concentration was observed during the winter months, especially in January (10.5%), February (13.2%) and March (13.7%), followed by September (10.5%). The season, in fact, with a higher incidence of paternal filicides was the Winter, with 51.3% of cases, while 23.7% occurred during the Summer. This incidence was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 30.6$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### ***Victim's characteristics***

The intended victims, or the children, were 44 males and 50 females, aged 0 months to 14 years ( $M = 6.8$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ ). They were grouped into age ranges, and the significance of the impact of circumstances was verified: the prevailing range was the school age when sons are between 7 and 10 years. On the contrary, the youngest children were the least affected ( $\chi^2 = 20.2$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The majority of victims (91.5%) had Italian citizenship, only 3.2% were foreign children residing in Italy, and 5.2% were children of mixed marriages or unions. 77.9% of the victims lived in the same house as the father. The remaining part lived in a different house, presumably due to a separation or divorce. In most of the cases examined ( $N = 34$ , = 44.7%), victims were two: son/daughter and wife (76.5%), and the incidence is significant ( $\chi^2 = 33.8$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

When it is killed, only the son/daughter ( $N = 28$ ) in 67.9% of cases is an only child. In eight cases, however, only one child is killed, even if the author has two or more children. Incidentally, the sample is divided into two halves perfectly. Except for two cases in which other relatives were involved, we found that only 37 fathers killed the children exclusively, and 37 killed both children and wife, ex-wife, partner, or ex-partner. For this reason, we analyzed the differences between the two groups concerning the possible risk factors involved and the potential methods of murder. Finally, it was noted also if the author has hurt - and then allegedly attempted to kill - other family members. In four cases, the author has attempted to kill his other children, who escaped from the murderous rampage.

In many cases, the murderer tried to kill his own wife and failed. In only one case, an acquaintance was wounded. This behavior seems to be related to the economic condition of the author: the greater the financial difficulties, the greater the attempts to make a family massacre ( $r = .226$  \*,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### ***Author's characteristics***

The authors of the filicides are 76, aged between 25 and 63 years ( $M = 40.9$ ,  $SD = 7.6$ ). Of these, 92.1% are Italian, only 6 are Italian citizens with foreign origins. The 68% of murdered fathers live in province areas rather than in large urban centers ( $\chi^2 = 10.3$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The 49% of the authors are involved in an occupation with low professional quality; 25% do not have a job, but only in 13.2% of cases is the reference to contingent economic difficulties (such as job loss) specified. Table 1 shows the occupations of the authors. As can be noticed, the most played an executive role as workman or employee. The professions that require a high intellectual profile and endorsements are rarely counted in familiar and paternal homicide cases ( $\chi^2 = 99.8$ ,  $df = 11$ ,

p <.001).

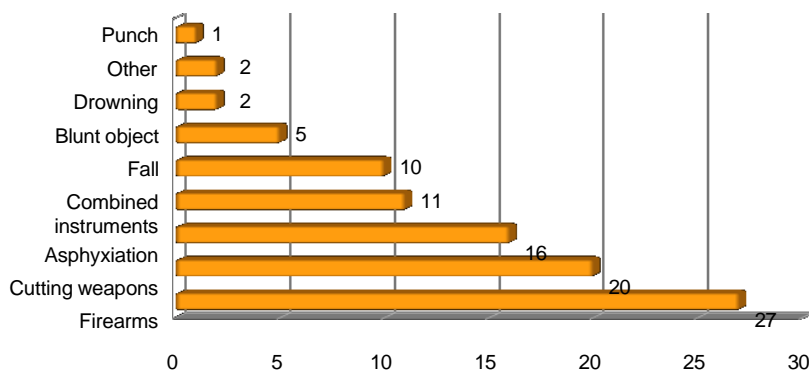
**Table 1.** Employment of the authors of filicide.

Fathers' Job	Frequency	Percentage
Workman	28	36.8 %
Executive employee	12	15.8 %
Unemployed	8	10.5 %
Freelance professional	7	9.2 %
Retailer	5	6.6 %
Conceptual employee	4	5.3 %
Serviceperson	4	5.3 %
Pitchman	3	3.9 %
Teacher	2	2.6 %
Various work	1	1.3 %
Male nurse	1	1.3 %
Other	1	1.3 %

Regarding employment status, 59.2% of the authors were employed, 25.4% were unemployed, 11.3% were occasionally employed, and 4.2% were retirees. Crossing the data, it emerged that successful suicide attempts are related to specific professions (\* r = .241, p<.001). More specifically, the higher the qualification, the higher the likelihood of suicide (r = .246 \*, p <.005). All teachers (2), military (4), and almost all traders (4 of 5) committed suicide. The most numerous are the workman fathers: on 28, 18 have committed suicide, and 5 have attempted suicide. Most of the fathers in our sample were married (56.6%), while 22% were separated or divorced. Considering the context of the murder, it emerges that cohabitants have a greater fear of abandonment. This element seems to be very specific: the younger the father, the greater the fear of loss (r = - .244 \*, p < 0.005), especially when the victim lives in a different residence from the father's one (\* r = .268, p <.005).

**Homicide details**

In most cases, the degree of violence with which was the murder is relatively low (59.8%). As shown in Figure 2, firearms are the most used, 13 (48%) of which were regularly held.



**Figure 2.** Type of arms utilized in the paternal filicide.

Once the filicide is completed, 58% of fathers committed suicide ( $\chi^2 = 20.7$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); 11 fathers have attempted suicide without carrying out the intention. Because of this, 82.9% of the authors don't give themselves up to authorities, despite those fathers who have not attempted suicide.

A portion of the sample (26.3%) had left a letter, a ticket, or made a phone call to announce the gesture, inferring that the murder was premeditated. In 66.2% of cases, the crime of impulse can't be excluded ( $\chi^2 = 7.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

Where possible and clearly expressed in the news reported, we found some elements of the personal life of the author who may have acted as risk factors in the paternal filicide. Table 2 shows a large number of detected cases and the related impact significance.

**Table 2.** Incidence of risk factors in the paternal filicides.

Risk factors	Count	percentage	X <sup>2</sup> (df=1)	p value
Fear of loss	18	23.4	21.83	.000
Wife pathologies	2	2.6	54.87	.000
Child pathologies	6	7.8	68.21	.000
Criminal history	15	19.7	27.84	.000
Sexual crimes	4	5.3	60.84	.000
Reported mistreatments	3	3.9	64.47	.000
Violent behaviour	25	32.9	8.89	.003
Stalking	3	3.9	64.47	.000
Drug use	6	7.9	53.89	.000
Alcoholism	4	5.3	60.84	.000
Gambling	2	2.6	68.21	.000
Organic disease	2	2.6	68.21	.000
Severe psychosocial stressors	15	19.7	27.84	.000
Psychiatric disease	31	40.8	2.5	.108
Anamnesis of psychiatric disease	23	30.3	11.84	.001

In the second step, we calculated the Spearman Rho correlations to analyze the relationships between 15 risk factors identified in the data collection. The correlations show that criminal history is strongly and predictably related to sexual offenses ( $r = .327^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ), violent behavior ( $r = .286^*$ ,  $p < .005$ ), stalking ( $r = .239^*$ ,  $p < .005$ ), and drug use ( $r = .468^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). But the most interesting fact is that violent and persecutor behavior had been previously reported to the authorities ( $r = .409^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The author's familiar violent behavior shows significant relationships with stalking ( $r = .290$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ), gambling (which assumes an impulse control disorder) ( $r = .235$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ), and organic disorders ( $r = .235^*$ ,  $p < .005$ ). The latter, in fact, more easily commit a crime of impulse ( $r = .233^*$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Instead, there is a negative relationship between violent behavior and psychosocial stressors: the more the author has suffered severe stress such as sorrow, job loss, economic hardship, or serious illness of his son's or wife, divorce, the less exhibit violent behavior ( $r = -.277^*$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

Furthermore, assessed correlations between risk factors and the methods of murder showed that when only children are killed, there is a greater fear of loss ( $r = -.240^*$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ) and stalking behaviors ( $r = .253^*$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ) against the ex-wife or partner. Finally, the greater the fear of loss, the lower the degree of violence ( $r = -.281^*$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ). These issues occur

with a significant incidence in cases where the child had a severe illness ( $r = -.248 *$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ). In these conditions, the murder takes place more likely in a public place, such as in a hospital ( $r = .413 **$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### ***What are the differences between those who kill only children and those who kill children and wives?***

Except for two cases in which other relatives were involved, we found that 37 fathers killed their children exclusively, and 37 killed both the children and the wife, ex-wife, partner, or ex-partner. For this reason, we analyzed the differences concerning the murder methods and the risk factors involved by comparing the two groups with the Mann and Whitney test. Concerning the methods of murder, the only variable that significantly differentiates the two groups is the fear of loss: the fathers distressed by the fear of losing their children tend to kill only the latter ( $U = 555$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The tendency to kill only the children is also more common among fathers with specific employment status ( $U = 444$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ): on the one hand, they kill both sons and wives when employed (57%); on the other hand, fathers kill only the children when unemployed (55.6% of cases), retirees (66.7%) and occasionally occupied (75%).

In relation instead to the risk factors, the fathers who had committed sexual offenses have killed both the children and the wife ( $U = 610.5$ ,  $p < 0.04$ ). Finally, a significant correlation between the sex of the victim and the degree of violence was found ( $r = .262 *$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ): against female victims is exercised a greater degree of violence ( $U = 779$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and emerge more violent behavior ( $U = 546$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

The study has as its object the identification of the characteristics of fathers who committed filicide in Italy. Findings showed a higher prevalence in regions such as Lombardy and Lazio, followed by Emilia Romagna and Sicily. These correspond also to the most densely populated. Hence, we have reason to think that this result is proportionally connected to population density. As regards the year in which paternal filicide mostly occurred, emerged a higher incidence in Winter. Christmas is a significant holiday in Italy; this is the time of year when many families stay together, free from work and school.

On the other hand, the materialistic aspects of the holiday are associated with less happiness, more stress, and unpleasant effects. Ramsey [11] underlined that on holidays, homicide significantly increases. Findings regarding victims, on the other side, revealed that the prevailing range of the victims is the school age, between 7 and 10 years, and that the youngest children are the least affected. This result is consistent with the review conducted by Bourget, Grace & Whitehurst [4], in which it emerged that fathers, compared to mothers, rarely commit neonaticide.

Paternal filicide emerged as having specific features. The majority of the little victims lived in the same house as the father. In fact, most of the fathers in our sample were married. This result is not self-evident. Being married is not an equivalent of being satisfied. Financial considerations are critical in whether a couple avoids separation or divorce but cannot prevent a familiar emotionally stressing climate, as stated by Carmela et al. [12]. In fact, one of the most important factors found in association with the murder of both son/daughter and wife was the economic difficulties, strictly linked to the attempts to make a family massacre.

The most popular employment found in the reference sample was the executive role - as a workman or employee. Professionals requiring an intellectual profile and endorsements rarely count in familiar and paternal homicide. Findings suggest that the higher the qualification, the higher the likelihood of suicide. Securing employment is critical to the psychosocial health of individuals. Job displacement or unemployment benefits were found to be associated with domestic violence [13]. We also found a relevant role played by age: the younger the father, the greater the fear of loss.

Indeed, the fear of loss is the only variable that significantly differentiates the two groups identified, i.e., between fathers who have killed exclusively their children and fathers who killed both the children and the wife, ex-wife, partner, or ex-partner, especially when the victim lives in a different residence from the father's one. Literature shows that the presence of

a social father can play a protective role for young males [14]. In most cases, the degree of violence with which was the murder is relatively low. We observed that the more the author has suffered severe stress, such as sorrow, job loss, economic hardship, or serious illness of his son's or wife, or divorce, the less he exhibits violent behavior. These findings could indicate that homicide is guided by emotions such as sadness and depression despite anger or rage [15,16]. A review by Bruno et al. [10] demonstrated that paternal perinatal depression is underestimated and may predict mental disease comorbidities. The low degree of violence is also associated with a greater fear of loss and stalking behaviors against the ex-wife or partner, as if homicide is heavily influenced by fear and anguish – which, from a psychological point of view, is a mixed feeling composed by fear and sadness [17].

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Preventing violence means combating its cultural roots and causes by empowering family support. For this, political strategies aimed at education, raising awareness, and recognizing and realizing equal opportunities in every public and private sphere are essential (World Health Organization) [18]. Psychosocial interventions to reduce discrimination and stereotypes related to gender roles and sexism are needed since they produce the contextual conditions conducive to the perpetuation of male violence against women. In this regard, the focus must be on the younger generation and investing in psychosocial training [19].

The prevention actions supported by the Department of Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers through the National Strategic Framework therefore reflect the need to: 1) raise the level of awareness in public opinion about the structural roots, causes on the consequences of male violence against women; 2) strengthen the school system by improving the operational capacity of teachers and school staff on how to intercept, prevent, bring out and manage situations of violence, including witnessing violence [20]; 3) promote in the school's educational offerings gender equality education for overcoming gender roles and stereotypes, including through the revision of teaching and textbooks and the training of teaching staff at all levels; 4) train public and private social workers on phenomenology, interception, emergence, taking charge, assessment and management of cases of violence against women including those involving migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women; 5) strengthen preventive efforts against recidivism through pathways for the re-education of male perpetrators of violence and crimes related to male violence against women; 6) raise awareness in the private sector and the media about the influence of communication and advertising on issues such as gender stereotyping and sexism and their effects on the phenomenology of male violence against women and children [21,22].

The current research underscores the critical need for early identification and intervention of key risk factors to prevent paternal infanticide. This involves a comprehensive approach that includes recognizing psychological, social, and environmental indicators that might lead to such incidents. It advocates for the implementation of support systems, such as counseling and therapy, tailored to at-risk individuals. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of community awareness and education to aid in early detection. It calls for a collaborative effort across various sectors, including healthcare, social services, and law enforcement, to establish a supportive network for families. Furthermore, the research stresses the necessity of ongoing monitoring and support, alongside advocating for policy changes that focus on family protection and support [23]. By addressing underlying causes like mental health issues [8,24], substance abuse, and domestic challenges, the research aims to provide a holistic strategy to significantly understand the occurrence of paternal infanticide in Italy.



**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization: GR, NR, LDV, AR; methodology: GR, NR, AR ; software: AR; validation: NR, GI, DC; formal analysis, NR and AR; investigation: NR, AR; resources: DC, GI; data curation: AR, NR; writing—original draft preparation: AR; writing—review and editing, AR, DC, GI; supervision: GR, LDV. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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